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THE QUORN RANCH

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The Quorn was oneeof the great ranches of the West. It's day is long since over but it's history still lives in Oldtimer's tales and should ever remain a symbol of our past. It is the substance upon which our present is built, as the perspective of the future will clearly reveal. This is generally true of all our ranching south land; but the Quorn, whose unique story holds a touch of pathos, worked better than it knew.

The men who rode and lived there are mostly gone. So far as I can discover the only ones remaining are : George Scott of Riverdale Avenue, Calgary, Thomas Jameson of Ballyhamage Ranch, Millarville, Douglas Hardwick of Calgary, Billy Playfair of Bassano, Lem Sexsmith of High River and Ted Hills, now a coffee planter in Africa.

It was from information given me by Mr. Scott and from the talk and tales heard around the dining-room table at home that I have pieced together much of the enthralling story of the Quorn Ranch.

The Quorn came into being in 1886. It was formed by a syndicate, the members of which were mostly Englishmen, for the purpose of breeding hunters for the English market. The very name, Quorn, is the name of the Hunt Club of Market HARBOROUGH in LEICESTERSHIRE, - a famous hunt club in a famous hunting county.

The district chosen for this ranching experiment was the Sheep Creek country, south of the river and west of the present location of Okotoks. An ideal site for the buildings was discovered in a pretty spot on the river bank about 8 miles up-creek from Okotoks. Here, those requisites for any settlement, water and shelter, abounded.

Considerable expense must have gone into the construction of the little colony of houses, barns and corrals that soon nestled there. All lumber had to be hauled with teams from Calgary and spruce logs for the corrals were brought down from the Foothills in the same way.

The manager's house was a little apart. Then there were bunkhouses and the cookhouse. West of these were the barns and corrals.

The breaking stable held about ten horses. It was specially built with single stalls in a row and little footways separating them. This, of course, facilitated handling the colts.

The stud barn was an L-shaped structure, containing quite a number of loose-boxes. Each stallion had a number which ornamented the front of his box, and as the numbers were artistically made out of coyotes' feet nailed into place the result was most effective.

East of the buildings there was a small pasture just half a mile in width and beyond this the mares' big pasture stretched as far east as the Big Rock. It's fence line ran straight north from here to Sheep Creek. The trail to Okotoks angled across this field, the gate being at the historic Rock itself.

To-day most people of Calgary and districts south have seen the Big Rock as they have whizzed passed on the Okotoks-Turner Valley Highway. But as the years have gone by, it has weathered and changed considerably. In the early days it had a large L-shaped crack extending far into it's interior. On one occasion a horse perished in this great fissure. The poor animal had wandered in and did not know enough to back around the right-angled turn.

The Quorn buildings, being man-made, have not been able to withstand the pressure of the hand of Time as well as the Big Rock. Their remains, long since deserted, may still be seen just across the Creek from the Turner Place, now owned by Art Hall.

But in "the good old days" the Quorn site hummed with activity. Although the half-section where the buildings, corrals and pasture were located, was the only land which the Syndicate actually purchased, the Quorn lease comprised quite a territory. It was bounded on the north by Sheep Creek, on the east by Cameron Coulee, and by Tongue Creek on the south. On the west there was no boundary clear to the Pacific, if one excepts the Rockies.

This land was leased for the surprising sum of one cent an acre with the option of buying for one dollar an acre. The main reason why purchase was never made was the idea, then prevalent, that there was more profit to be made out of stock raised on leased land.

Several men tried their hand at management of the Quorn at different times during it's history. The man who handled the money end and looked after the organization in England for many years was J. W. Martin. He spent several summers out on the ranch, returning to England for the winter. He also attended to the actual ranch management for awhile.

The first ranch manager, however, was an ex-Hudson Bay man, J. J. Barter by name, whose name holds an important place in the annals of the district. The prairie road which wound across the range from the Quorn Ranch to Calgary was known for many years as the Barter Trail. The last time Barter travelled this trail he was lying ill of typhoid fever in the back of a democrat and George Scott was taking him to Calgary - to die.

Charlie Douglas, afterwards very well known down in the Red Deer country, took over the management next. Later an Irishman. R. H. Jamieson, was manager and E. J. Swann, who succeeded him was the one who saw the final dissolution of the enterprise. A shareholder himself, he undertook the management in an unsuccessful effort to raise the falling fortunes of the Quorn.

For somehow the Quorn was doomed to failure in the purpose undertaken. One of the causes for this was the expensive, impractical way in which it was run. Regular communication between Alberta and England by cablegram did not make for profit. Then, too, hordes of younger sons of the shareholders were sent out to the Quorn to "do a season in the West". They spent their time hunting and fishing and were, for the most part, not altogether an asset.

Despite the fact that good stock was imported and good horses raised, the coveted English hunting market was never gained. In 1892, Gordon Cumming and George Scott took a large shipment of about 100 head to England. This was quite an expensive expedition. The horses were kept in Eastern Canada for two months to fit them. Feed was cheap here. Probably the horses liked the change of diet as much as the men enjoyed the fresh tomatoes, corn on the cob, and other delicacies after the pork, beans and dried apples fare of the West.

Eventually these Quorn horses reached Liverpool where they were supposed to be bought by a man named Folkes to be sold to the London Bus Co. Unfortunately the deal fell through and the horses were sold at auction at a terrible loss, some animals going for less than £10.

Reverses of this sort were too much for the Quorn. Gradually the stock had to be sold to meet expenses and the great lease dwindled away.

Despite this failure the ranch was successful in a way undreamed of. The animals that were raised on the Quorn laid the foundation for much of the good stock which helped to give Southern Alberta the name it achieved as a ranching country. Had the Quorn succeeded in it's objective of shipping to England most of this good blood would have been lost to our industry.

The breeding stock, which made the Quorn, deserves much closer attention. In 1886 when the scheme was inaugurated quite a number of English, and about 15 Irish, thoroughbred mares and several stallions were brought out. Most of these mares had been raced, and were more or less broken down as far as the turf was concerned but they raised some very fine horses. In 1889 two more stallions were imported. Then later a large herd of light mares, good stock, was trailed up from Montana. These were known as the Oxly mares because they were branded OK on the left shoulder. They were not from the Oxley Ranch.

Most Quorn horses were branded with the letters I and V, like this . At one time as many as 1200 horses carried the Quorn brand.

The names of the Quorn stallions are well-known to many westerners. Eaglesplume was claimed by many to be the pick of the bunch. He was a beautiful bay with a nice disposition. Acrostic was another expensive animal, a one-time winner of the Ascot. Novalis was a good horse too, but he became very mean and had to be blinded. Later the Church brothers of Millarville got him. Audacious, Grand Coup, Yorkist and Preston Grange completed the early list of thoroughbreds. Cotisemore, a fine Cleveland Bay stallion, lived out a good span of years and his final owner was J. R. Kieran of Midnapore. Quorn and Pychley were also of the coach horse type. It was hoped that these horses would result in a larger, heavier animal.

Although primarily a horse ranch the Quorn went in strongly for cattle raising, too. In 1889 Gordon-Cummings, a shareholder in the Company, brought out a herd of purebred Polled Angus cattle, 91 heifers and 6 bulls, from his own Scottish farm. These were the antecedents of the fine Angus cattle owned by J. D. MacGregor of Brandon to-day.

This same shipment included other livestock. Besides two more light stallions there was the famous Ballyminnock - a grand horse, half Clydesdale and half Shire, purebred on each side. He really provided the start of the good draft horses of the Sheep Creek - Okotoks district.

Joe Whitbread had charge of the stallions during the voyage and George Scott assumed responsibility for the cattle. These two were both lads then, athirst for adventure and a trip such as this appealed strongly to them.

Several hounds also crossed the Atlantic at this time. These were Scottish Deer Hounds and Fox Hounds, brought out to hunt coyotes which were very plentiful in those days. Some of the hounds took very quickly to the new sport, in fact one of them, Joe, could soon kill a coyote alone. The poor dogs suffered as much from seasickness during the two weeks voyage as any human.

The imported Angus purebreds merely formed the nucleus of the Quorn cattle. One thousand head in one bunch were trailed up from Montana and it is estimated that, at it's peak, the Quorn herd numbered 5000 head. These cattle were branded with the Quorn \|/ or a Z, both on the right ribs.

The care of the thousands of animals roaming the range meant plenty of riding and hard riding, particularly at some seasons. The Quorn kept a string of about 50 or 60 cowponies and saddlehorses for the job. Some of these were outstanding horses in one way or another. Blackstrap was one. He was a wonder at cutting out cattle and was used only for this purpose. Peanuts was another whose name still lives. He was a fine chestnut, "a horse that filled the eye", and was generally ridden by Ted Hills, who, being foreman at the time, could pick and choose.

Others were like Chocolate, a pretty tough little customer who was ever alert to try and catch his rider unawares, and upon such an occasion hilquickly demonstrated all he knew about bucking, which was considerable. Ted Hills, in describing an exhibition of his once said, "You know boys, Tom here, hung on by hooking his spur around the horn."

Of the riders who came and went at the Quorn volumes might be written. Many were American stockmen, many more were young fellows just out from the Old Country. Of the latter, some were very soon ready to exchange punching cows in Alberta for a life of ease across the ocean. But by far the greatest number stuck it out and made good. They learned the hard way, but they learned well. As horse breakers and general stockmen many of them were unsurpassed. And this was another way in which the Quorn benefited Alberta, - it gave so many of her stockmen their baptism into ranch life.

Some of these rangemen later owned ranches of their own, others got jobs, connected with stock, a few went elsewhere, but doubtless all of them looded back on their cowboy days as the happiest of their lives. It was a singularly carefree life. They had no responsibilities, no worries, nothing to bother about. They drifted around from ranch to ranch as fancy led them. During the Round-ups, they worked hard, spending long hours in the saddle. At times they were called upon to weather the scorching heat of Alberta's sun, the terrific force of her storms of the howling sting of her blizzards. At some other times they merely enjoyed living. It is no wonder that a spell of romance has been woven around the early ranch life of the South.

The names of many of the men who worked at the Quorn are familiar ones in Southern Alberta.

Nigger John Ware, one of the best riders who ever "hit the country" was bronco-buster there during the Quorn's early days. Later he got a place of his own further West up Sheep Creek and still later moved down on the Red Deer. Nigger John's strength and his ways with horses and with men have made him famous. It is said that when he was handling a bad bronc, which wouldn't let him mount, he'd grasp it's ear with one hand, the saddle horn with the other and brace his knee against the horse's side. Then exerting his great strength he'd deliberately pull the animal over. Throwing a leg across the prostrate form he'd say quietly,"Alright boy, you can get up now". Many similar stories about Nigger John are still told by men who knew him.

Joe Whitbread worked at the Quorn from the time of his arrival in the West in 1889 until shortly before the ranch broke up. His main job was the care of the stallions. Many years later he held th e position of Brand Inspector in Calgary.

George Scott, who came West at the same time, stayed with the Quorn until his trip home in 1892. During this period he became so much a part of the life of the big ranch that for many years he was commonly known as "Quorn Scottie". He participated in a Round-up in 1890 or'91 and acted as cattle foreman for some time. Ben Rankin and Mike Herman also served in this capacity. Mike Herman was reputed to be an outstanding man with a lasso. He, too, owned aranch later and like many other cattlemen suffered very heavy losses during one of the hard winters of the early 1900's.

Finland

was one of the buster's jobs.

and Garage.

The round-up worked from the Lethbridge area north through a great expanse of open country. One wagon went up the Big Bow and another up the Belly. The cattle were brought up north of High River, usually in two great drives. After the Stock Association built corrals on the flats near the present location of the Black Diamond Stampede grounds, much of the cutting out and separating of the great herd took place here.

Many of the big Cattle Companies from across the line or out of this territory sent representatives, or "reps", as they were called to the Round-ups. A man had to be really trusted and relied upon by an Outfit before he was given the job of "repping". The cattle belonging to his Outfit that were gathered in the Round-up were his responsibility to take back to their own range or to sell for his Company.

The Horse Round-up was conducted in much the same way and covered pretty well the same territory as the cattle one. The pace was faster however and not as many wagons were required.

Anyone, who has listened to the yarns that rise through the haze of tobacco smoke when a group of the real old rangemen get together, can realize what a fund of lore lies in the tales of the big Round-ups.

There are stories of riding herd during nights of inky blackness or of sleety rain and penetrating cold when fingers stiffened on the lines and bodies grew numb despite the protection of overcoats and long oilskin slickers. Range stampedes that were narrowly averted, or sometimes not averted, are relived, and in imagination one can hear the roar of thundering hooves, the excited shouts of men or their quiet crooning voices as the herds settle down.

A surprising numberoof Round-up stories centre around the night wrangler. It happened now and then that the horses would be quiet and the wrangler tired. He'd decide to get off his horse and rest awhile. Of course he wouldn't go to sleep - but of course he did. Some hours later would come a chilly awakening to the cold gray dawn and the cold hard fact that the saddle bunch had vamoosed. Then would come scurrying and hurrying. Sometimes they would all be recovered and sometimes they wouldn't. Usually not much was said to the harassed night wrangler when he panted into camp. There was some good-natured ribbing of course, but tolerance was ever a Western characteristic.

George Scott tells a story that once occurred during a round-up of beef cattle when he was "repping"for the High River Stock Association. The cattle were being held in a place known by the a attractive name of Boneyard Coulee. George Scott and Charlie Miller were standing herd on the watch which stretched into the depth of the night. It happened,that neither man had a watch which told the time so they took out the alarm clock so they'd know when their shift was over. The arrangement was that one of them would ride into camp at the appointed hour and rouse the next herders who would hurry out to relieve the other fellow.

The night was dark and dismal. The wind came rustling and sighing down through Boneyard Coulee. There it paused momentarily as though holding it's breath to listen for the shades of the departed denizens whose bones gleamed through the darkness. Perhaps the cattle sensed the eerie atmosphere of the place for they shifted restlessly and sniffed the night air uneasily.

The men circled carefully, anxious to prevent a stampede - a dire calamity with beef cattle.

Suddenly the quiet was broken by the alarm on the clock going off with a sound like a shrill shriek. As if at a preconceived signal the terrified animals sprang into action and galloped away.

Despite the blackness of the night and the roughness of the country the riders managed to stop the cattle before they got too far away or ran off too many pounds of beef. Still it was a pretty big risk to leave one man in charge while the other went for relief so they continued circling and trying to quiet the animals throughout the long, dark hours.

When an opportune moment for talk arrived Charlie Miller asked his companion what in tarnation had sent the bunch off like that? He still carried the offending alarm clock, but it's raucous voice which had struck terror into several hundred hearts hadn't bothered him at all. He was very deaf and had never even heard it.

Most Oldtimers tell some version of the "looking for strays" story. This was a ruse which served as an excuse in the old days for a visit, and maybe a cup of tea, where there happened to be some young ladies.

On one occasion during Round-up time Tom Jameson found himself not far from the home of the fair Misses Sexsmith. So naturally he rode on a few miles further, up to the ranch house and dismounted. He knocked at the door and when Mrs. sexsmith appeared he doffed his Stetson politely and inquired in his best manner if anyone there had seen any strays.

From somewhere in the inner regions of the house a familiar voice called out, "Now, Tom, you needn't come here looking for strays!" It seemed George Scott had arrived first. This sally was greeted by titters and girlish giggles. The newcomer blushed furiously and beat a hasty retreat.

In telling of the incident he always says, "George was working at the Bar U at the time. He hadn't any more right to be there than I had".

The final break-up of the Quorn came soon after the turn of the Century. There was no big sale of stock. They were bought by numerous ranchers throughout the district. The ⅄ brand and possibly the largest number of horses to go to any one man were bought by Christie of High River. E. J. Swann had a sale of household goods in 1906 or thereabouts. Bertie Cochrane lived on the old place for some time afterwards.

The Quorn men, in speaking of life on the old ranch do not dwell on the Quorn's later days. Their fondest memories are of the ranch in it's hey-day, when it was a focal point of activity, thronging with life and color - typical of the early ranching days of the great West.